

UNBELIEVABLE! BLUES HAND OXFORD A FREE GIFT

By STUART EARP: Oxford City 1, Wycombe Wanderers 0

ONE unbelievable error by centre half Dave Bullock handed grateful Oxford City three points on a plate at the White House ground on Saturday. And although Wycombe Wanderers are still on top of the Rothmans Isthmian League, the defeat — their first since October 23 — could prove extremely costly later in the season when the title race hots up.

The deciding incident, one of the most amazing I have seen for a long time, came in the 72nd minute and was a perfect example of playing to the whistle. Peter Delawary took a corner on the left and sent the ball curling past the far post. Everyone assumed it had gone — everyone line and consequently out of play. Everyone, except Alan Evans, that is. He hooked it back from the bye-line, into the centre of the penalty box where Bullock, for some unaccountable reason, caught the ball.

To his horror he saw the referee A. Ward, glance at his linesman and then point to the spot, indicating a penalty. Poor Dave could hardly believe it and kicked the ball into the crowd in disgust.

Afterwards he said, "I've never done anything like that before in my life. I just couldn't believe it when the referee awarded a penalty. I know I should have headed it away but the ball was a good yard over the line."

But even if the ball was out of play as all the Wycombe players insist, there is no getting away from the fact that it was a cardinal sin to handle the ball inside the box — a rule that is drummed into players at the very early age.

With only 18 minutes remaining, Wanderers were unable to pull back a share of the spoils. Indeed, had they played on until the next day, it is doubtful whether they would have found the back of the net. And for a side who top the goalscoring charts with 76 this season and have scored 14 goals in their last three games, Wycombe's ineffectiveness up front was quite amazing. In fact it was only the second time this season they have failed to score in a league match. The first was at Kingstonian on October 13, when the Blues were held to a 0-0 draw.

Oxford hardly looked any likelier to break through either. The conditions had much to do

with the type of football produced. A strong wind and bumpy pitch made control difficult both in the air and on the ground, while the blinding sun was an added hazard.

Chances were limited at both ends by two tall and powerful defences with the four centre backs — Mead and Bullock for Wycombe and Woodley and Evans for Oxford — blotting out many promising raids.

John Woodley was particularly impressive. A former striker, he held the City defence together and dominated Wycombe's chief scoring threat, Steve Perrin. Tony Horseman was through a quiet 90 minutes after taking off an early knock while Dylan Evans was unable to lift himself out of his current bad patch.

With the considerable wind at their backs, in the first half, Wanderers pressed strongly with John Maskell's long goalkicks putting immediate pressure on the home side. In the first 15 minutes, the Blues forced five corners. From the second Horseman had a shot deflected by another player which Bullock drove into the post the post after keeper Peter Harris had failed to punch clear.

The Blues' main hope of a goal was from midfield. But here they were given so little time and room to move in by Steve Freeman and Eric Metcalfe, that

their undoubted talents were never allowed to materialise.

Before the match, Wanderers had made a surprise selection, bringing in Paul Birdseye for Roger Grant at left back, as a result of Grant's poor game at Clapton last week. The switch failed. Although competent in the first half, Birdseye seemed content to sit back and let Bullock whenever it came his way later on. He must also have been close to being booked for some over-physical challenges in the closing stages.

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Oxford could do little in reply

to the Wycombe pressure. When they did capture possession they soon gave it away again with a string of misdirected passes. It took them 21 minutes to get in their first shot when former Wanderer Bobby Marcham flicked a shot wide after a cross from Mike Sherrell.

Wycombe hit back. In the 29th minute, from another corner, Oxford failed to clear the ball and after a scramble, Keith Mead flicked it out to Evans on the right. Dylan's firm cross was met well by Terry Reardon who sent a glancing header towards the corner of the net only to see Harris dive full length and push it around the upright.

Then in the 33rd minute Bullock almost broke the deadlock. An all too rare rudge from Horseman gave Bullock a chance. Running onto the ball as Bullock had done, he flicked the ball over the "keeper but then saw Neil Hartigan race across and clear off the line.

From Wycombe's eighth and final corner of the half, Oxford were again lucky to get off the hook. Holfield's inswinging flag kick was headed out of the area to Reardon but his shot flew just wide.

Two minutes before the break City almost took a shock lead. The ball bounced awkwardly into the visitors' area and as Bullock hesitated to clear for a second, Delawary darted in and forced a full length save from Maskell, making his return after a month's absence.

So despite all their pressure and corners, Wanderers were still unable to break through after 45 minutes and in the second half they had to contend with the sun and strong wind.

The advantage of the elements made little difference to City. In only the fourth minute of the new half Steve Freeman, who also had a short spell at Loakes Park, was only fractionally wide with a piledriver of

a shot from outside the penalty area, the ball rushing narrowly past the upright.

Wycombe could find no answer to the home attacks. The teamwork and cohesion that is the hub of their game was sadly lacking and the amount of chances created in the second period could be counted on one hand. No matter how hard they tried, they just couldn't get into top gear.

Their first shot on target took 13 minutes and then Harris was in little trouble to save from Horseman. Not so Maskell at the other end. He delayed coming out for the ball as Marcham closed in and almost allowed the Oxford centre forward a clear shot at goal.

In the 65th minute Bullock went close when he Pritchard's corner looping towards the top of the net but Harris tipped it over the top in fine style.

Soon afterwards Bullock gave away the penalty which Woodley crashed past John Maskell to put Oxford ahead. It was a lead they were never to relinquish. The goal provided City with a real boost and Maskell had to be on his toes to keep out a drive from Woodley after 77 minutes.

Wanderers became more and more frustrated in the closing stages and gave away an uncharacteristic number of free kicks. The referee pulled up Marcham and Reardon after one clash but thankfully, both sides kept their "cool".

Wycombe had one good chance to snatch a share of the spoils with five minutes left. Holfield received the ball on the edge of the box and crossed it. From a narrow angle he hit the ball with full power but it flew into the crows behind the net.

A late equaliser, which seemed most unlikely, might have been deserved for their first half pressure but on this form Wycombe looked anything but championship material. And there will have to be a good deal of improvement in their remaining matches against the likes of Bishop's Stortford and Leytonstone, if they are to take the title.

OXFORD: P. Harris; J. Tompkins, R. Cooper, J. Woodley, A. Evans; E. Metcalfe, S. Freeman, N. Hartigan; A. Marcham, P. Reardon, M. Sherrell; Sub. M. Hunt (not used).

WYCOMBE: J. Maskell; P. Birdseye, K. Mead, D. Bullock, P. Wood; L. Pritchard, T. Reardon, M. Holfield; A. Horseman, S. Perrin, D. Evans; Sub. D. Gamble (not used).

Referee: A. W. Ward (New Southgate).
Half time: 0-0. **Goalscorers:** Oxford — Woodley (72 pen).